

## **The Life and Art of Atanas Kolarovski, master performer and teacher of Macedonian folk dance**

Atanas was born in the village of Drachevo, the Republic of Macedonia on August 9, 1926. He grew up in a typical pre-industrial Balkan village and home. The people of his village, including his own family, grew or made just about everything they consumed. They grew their own food, kept livestock for meat and milk products, and wore clothing and shoes of simple village or home production. Atanas explains that: "the villagers only occasionally went to town, and that was usually only to trade for oil and salt that they couldn't produce at home themselves."

The Kolarovi family, according to one of its elders, Mile Kolarov, Atanas's uncle and a one-time mayor of their village, tells that their clan settled in Drachevo, which is some eight miles from the capital city of Skopje, nearly 300 years ago. They were originally from the central Macedonian Prilep region.

Mile was one of six brothers and their families who lived together in a large, central compound until after the Second World War. Their household consisted of two family homes next to each other with a total of 49 family members- grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, children, in-laws and grandchildren, all living and working together in remarkable harmony., Given the violent history of Macedonia, it was only natural that the Macedonian village families banded together for their mutual protection and survival. 1

Although their village was Macedonian, their region, like much of the Balkans, was ethnically mixed. There were nearby communities of Albanians and Gypsies, who had a certain amount of influence on the cultural life of the region, including the musical traditions.

If life was harsh for them in many respects, with little in the way of material comforts, medical care, formal education, or social security, the village people had long ago learned how to make the best of their humble circumstances. From ancient times their lives revolved around a series of holidays and festivals that marked the change of the seasons, birth, death and marriage, and with the arrival of Christianity, the inclusion of church holidays such as Christmas, Easter and Saints Days. On such occasions the people would rest from their labors and celebrate in a long-established pattern of activity.. As Atanas has explained to me: "We did not dance in isolation. It was all part of the greater whole of our lives."

The Kolarovi family was exceptional for its many talented musicians in a village known for its music. Atanas describes how their large extended family frequently gathered of an evening, in the absence of modern sources of entertainment, to play music, sing songs and dance for their own entertainment. He was dancing and singing and playing the kaval and the accordion along with the other family members from a very early age. A number of family members went on to have professional careers in music.

His uncle, Mile, who was one of Atanas's early teachers and influences in his musical education, was a popular performer on Macedonian radio for many years on the flute known as the kaval and the Macedonian bagpipe or gajda. He was also one of the organizer's of the world-traveling Macedonian folk troupe Tanec, that his nephew Atanas would play such a major role in as dancer, teacher and choreographer.

While there was much joy in music in the Kolarovi household, there was also much hardship during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Only thirteen years before Atanas's birth, his native land had been "officially" divided up among the three Balkan states of Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War One. The village of Drachevo ended up in the Serbian-occupied part of Macedonia. It was renamed South Serbia and children such as Atanas were only allowed to study the Serbian language in school. Their native Macedonian language was publicly forbidden. The entire Macedonian culture was forced to exist during that period in the private life of the home. It was the only place where the common speech and the old familiar songs and stories of the people were to be heard. Atanas tells the story of his return from school one day, wearing a Serbian-style soldier's cap. When his father saw it, he frowned and demanded to know why Atanas was wearing it. Atanas told him that the teachers had demanded that they all wear these caps that the school officials had handed out to them. His father grabbed the hat off his head and threw it into the trash. These people were not among those who would readily be assimilated into the occupier's fold.

The years of the Second World War, when Atanas was a teenager, were an especially harsh time for the people of his village. He remembers one winter when the partisan army fighting the German, Italian and Bulgarian fascist occupation of Yugoslavia, took nearly all of the village's grain harvest to feed the troops. The family had only a supply of winter squash left to eat. Fortunately, a neighbor and friend to the family came to them with two sacks of wheat flour that kept them all alive that winter. Atanas says that family members still occasionally talk about that man and his great gift that saw the family through one of the hardest times during the war.

At the age of sixteen in November of 1944 Atanas joined the Partisan Army of Yugoslavia that was at that time engaged in a fierce struggle to drive the fascist occupiers from their land. (The Yugoslavian Sremski Front had a quarter of a million troops locked in a protracted struggle that would last into the spring of 1945, and in which tens of thousands would perish.) The army only allowed him to volunteer at his age with the permission of his father, but

Atanas was still a bit young to be thrown into the battle raging further north, although thousands of young Macedonian recruits would be engaged in the fight before it was over.

The fact that he did not end up on the front lines was due to the exceptional musical aptitude and ability he displayed during auditions for an army music ensemble that the Macedonian conductor Trajko Prokopiev held that fall of 1944 in the village of Gorno Vranovci. Atanas's uncle Mile, who was a well-known folk musician at the time, recommended his young nephew, but it was Atanas's exceptional talent with kaval and accordion that won him a place in the army's musical group. It was the first step in a very long career of public musical performance.

During the war years 1944 and 1945 Atanas trained with the army choir and learned and performed songs and dances from all over the Balkans, including songs and dances from Slovenian, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Albanian, Bulgarian and, of course, his native Macedonian tradition. These were important training and performing years for him as part of the partisan army music troupe that performed for the soldiers as part of morale building during the last days of World War Two and the first days of the Federated Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. He further refined his skills as a musician, dancer, teacher and choreographer as a member of the Macedonian national folk ensemble Tanec through the 1950's and 60's. He was also involved during that period in the folk ensembles Kocho Racin and Karposh as well as the troupes of Blagoj Sosolcev and Vlado Tasevski and the Ethnic and Dance Theatre, among others.

In the early 1970's, after serving for a period as artistic director of Tanec, Atanas and his family moved to Seattle, Washington, where he has based his career as the premier world-traveling teacher of the art of Macedonian folk dance. <sup>2</sup> That career has spanned some four decades and exposed thousands of people worldwide to the pleasures of the traditional Macedonian folk dance in its hundreds of variations.

For over 60 years Atanas Kolarovski has been teaching his chosen art and craft, the Macedonian folk dance. Several years ago the Seattle Folk Life Festival recognized Atanas for his lifetime achievement as a major contributor to the rich cultural life of his home community of Seattle. (Seattle is actually his second home. His first home will always be in his family's home village of Drachevo in the Republic of Macedonia.)

Atanas launched his teaching career in North America in 1964 with a tour that may be the first ever by a Macedonian folk dance teacher on this continent. In addition to venues in many of the major cities of the United States, including instruction at a number of folk dance camps, Atanas continued to teach in European countries such as Belgium, Holland, Germany and Switzerland, and in more recent years his tours have included visits to the Far East, where he is a popular teacher of Macedonian folk dance in Japan. He has also nurtured the performance of folk troupes such as the Duquesne Tamburitians of Indiana, for whom he has served as a consultant and choreographer.

Atanas's notes on his workshop schedule in the USA beginning in February of 1976 gives some indication of the extent of some of his travels and work over the years. He began the tour with a visit to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he worked with the German Town Country Dancers. He then continued on for a workshop sponsored by the City Arts Department of Cleveland, Ohio from February 5-8. Then he visited Ann Arbor, Michigan, followed by Madison, Wisconsin, Champagne, Illinois, Detroit, Michigan, St. Louis, Missouri, Kansas City, Missouri, Los Alamos, New Mexico, Phoenix, Arizona, Tuscon, Arizona, San Diego, California, Boulder, Colorado, Denver, Colorado, Los Angeles, California, ending the tour with a visit to San Antonio, Texas.

Atanas's notes on his tour of the Netherlands from October 3rd to the 18<sup>th</sup> in 1998 include a list of the folk songs Atanas presented at the workshops. It is an indication of the extent of the exposure to Macedonian folk tradition that such international students receive when they participate in one of his workshops. The tour sponsors produced a CD of the songs for participants to take home with them with the following titles: 1. Liljana, mome, 2. Sal nok ne sum zaspalo, 3. Hunovo, 4. Pravo Dracevsko, 5. Pletenica, 6. Dedo milo dedo, 7. Vardarsko Pajdusko, 8. Ovcopolsko, 9. Nevestinsko, 10. Stipsko, 11. Prvo ljubav, 12. Gorno selsko, 13. Svadbarsko, 14. Lazi vere, 15. Stipsko zapleteno, 16. Blagino, 17. Kalajdzisko, 18. Mi se sobrale, 19. Baba Gurga, 20. Belasicko.

Atanas has bestowed the gift of Macedonian folk songs, music and dance on thousands of people all over the world as a teacher and as an artist/performer. <sup>3</sup> He has been a major goodwill ambassador for Macedonian culture for over half a century now. He has expressed the importance of dance and music as a way to resist the hatred and hostility that feeds so much of the ethnic conflict that is so common today in the Balkans and in so many other places around the world. He repeats for those who learn songs and dances the Macedonian saying: "Koj igra i pee, zlo ne misli." "He who sings and dances doesn't think bad thoughts."

We certainly should not underestimate the significance of this work in worldwide recognition of a Macedonian society and culture worthy of respect. However, Atanas continues to remind his foreign students and admirers of Macedonian folk dance that the essence of the dance is not purely technical performance. He once shocked one of his Japanese students after their group had performed a nearly flawless version of one particularly intricate and demanding Macedonian dance, and the student asked Atanas what he thought of their performance. Atanas replied, "It was technically very good, but there is something about the serious way in which all of you dance that does not please me. You see, back home when we dance at a village or family celebration, we begin with a delicious meal and then wine. Then the singing begins, and we begin playing our tappan drums and kaval flutes and other instruments. And when our spirits are sufficiently aroused, then we rise up and begin to express our feelings through the dance." That spirit that Atanas was trying to explain to his earnest young Japanese student will always remain at the heart of the Macedonian folk dance and music of Atanas Kolarovski.

The importance of cultural ambassadors such as Atanas Kolarovski in the recognition and respect for Macedonians and their distinct cultural heritage in the world should not be underestimated. While younger generations of Macedonians, particularly those raised in emigre communities, have had their understanding and appreciation of their own cultural heritage enriched through participation in Atanas's workshops and teaching sessions, thousands of non-Macedonians all over the world associate Macedonia with the pleasurable experience of its traditional songs and dances because they participated in programs taught by Atanas.

Perhaps his greatest impact has been as a 'teacher of teachers' of Macedonian folk dance. When Atanas teaches a group of over a hundred Japanese folk dance teachers to dance a Macedonian dance, those teachers may, in turn, teach that dance to many thousands of students all over Japan. In real terms, this means that many thousands of non-Macedonians, when they hear the word "Macedonia" or "Macedonians" do not immediately think of ancient world conquerors or ugly modern day international political disputes. They instead think of their delight in dancing traditional Macedonian dances to hauntingly beautiful melodies and songs of love and of life with all of its sorrows and joys. 4

They also come away with a new appreciation of some of the old ways of our agrarian ancestry from the 6000 to 10,000 year old Neolithic village tradition. The modern day world made possible by the 200 year old industrial/electronic revolution often looks disparagingly at our humble collective agrarian roots. Peasants, village folk and rural people in general, worldwide, are often portrayed as ignorant and backward. This unfair stereotyping of country people is contradicted whenever one of us takes great pleasure or delight in the Macedonian folk dance and music of a master teacher and performer such as Atanas Kolarovski. 5

Atanas, through his art, has inspired and delighted folk dance enthusiasts the world over. John Kuo, artistic director of the ensemble, Balkanske Igre of Chicago, quite eloquently sums up the sentiments of those who have experienced Atanas as folk dancer and teacher: " He is not only the finest exponent of Macedonian dance, but his insight, creativity and surpassing artistry has informed and raised this form to a new level. Dancers, whether native Macedonians or members of the international folk dance community, have been fortunate witness to a surpassing talent which has given the culminating expression to the pre-industrial Macedonian folk culture. Appreciate him, study all you can from him, thank him! We will not see the likes of him again in our lifetime." 6

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## Notes

1. It was not uncommon for Macedonian village families to live and work together in such numbers. Over the centuries Macedonia had often been a disputed border land or under the occupation of a foreign kingdom or empire dating back to the Roman conquest over two thousand years ago and followed in the Middle Ages by Bulgarian, Serbian, Byzantine Greek and Ottoman Turkish empires. In every case the occupiers imposed their order and punished resistance. Often the state authorities harshly misused the Macedonian peasantry, subjecting them to heavy taxation and forced labor, and sexually forcing themselves on the young women and taking the young men to serve in armies. To protect the villagers from the predations of armed robbers during the frequent lawless periods in Macedonia right up through the fascist occupation of the Balkans during World War Two.

2. I first met Atanas Kolarovski in October of 1975 in Seattle, Washington. Atanas and his wife Ljupka and I were among the participants in an evening celebration of Balkan folk life, with music, food and dance, at a local community hall. Like so many others with an affinity for Macedonia (I am a Macedonian-American born in Detroit, Michigan), they immediately took me under their wing. I have visited them many times over the years, both at their homes in Seattle, Washington and Drachevo, Macedonia, and at their former restaurant, The Yugoslavia, in the University District of Seattle, sharing delicious Macedonian meals and always enjoying the music of Macedonia.

3. I received my first lesson in Macedonian folk dance from Atanas in 1984. My wife Susan Prescott and I received an invitation to participate in the annual month long Summer Seminar on the Macedonian Language, Literature, History and Culture held in Ohrid, Republic of Macedonia in Yugoslavia. All of our expenses for the seminar would be paid by the Center for Macedonian Emigres in Skopje, Macedonia, but we were responsible for our airfare. In order to raise money for our travel we hit upon the idea of staging a Balkan village celebration with traditional food and dance in our home village of Greenbank on Whidbey Island, north of Seattle. We raised dairy goats at the time and we had two goats to slaughter and roast for the main course of the meal. Atanas and Ljupka came out from Seattle and helped us prepare the meat, and Atanas brought along his accordion and some dance tunes on records in order to lead guests in the dance. Sometime toward the end of the celebration Atanas and Ljupka insisted that I come out onto the dance floor and dance the "teshkoto oro" (the hard dance).

4. There were others, such as George Tomov and Dick Crum, who were also actively teaching Macedonian dances in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America. George Tomov, in particular, with his dance group "Tomov" exposed many thousands of people to Macedonian dance. Author Slave Nikolovski-Katin wrote a monograph, available in both English and Macedonian, on Tomov and his dance group.

5. My own time among the village people of Macedonia during extended stays with my father's two older brothers and their families in northwestern Macedonia, including living with cousins who were. "ovchari" (shepherds) in a "bachilo" (hut) high up on the Shar Mountain range of northwestern Macedonia altered my view of country life dramatically.

6. John Kuo wrote these words as part of his "Paeon to a Paragon- Atanas Kolarovski", on the 28<sup>th</sup> of May, 1995, when the Seattle Folk Life Festival honored Atanas for his lifetime contribution to the cultural life of the city.